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Americanization Agency

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The Army as an Americanization Agency

by

Captain Bernard Lentz, *General Staff*

The Republican and the Democratic members of Congress who accompanied our party to Camp Lee the other day are, I believe, impressed with the idea that the Army is trying to take up the problems of educational and vocational training in a practical way. We believe in high thinking but in practical execution. We try to be guided by the lesson that is taught us by the story of the school boy, John, who was sent home from school one day with a note from the teacher to his mother. The note read: "Your boy John smells, he needs a bath." The next morning John returned to school with a note to the teacher from his mother which said: "Dear Teacher, my boy John ain't no rose. Don't smell him, *learn* him."

This practical working out of our educational problems is particularly significant in connection with the Americanization work that the army is doing. There is an old law on the statute books, passed in 1894 which provides that in time of peace no person (except an Indian) who cannot speak, read and write the English language may enlist. For reasons that I will dwell on briefly before I finish speaking, the War Department has requested Congress to repeal this old law. The bill to bring this about has already passed the Senate, was reported favorably by the House Committee on Military Affairs last October and now occupies a place on the House Calendar.

When the war with Germany came along the draft act made no distinction between the literate and the illiterate. Twenty-four and nine-tenths percent of the drafted men could not read a newspaper or write a letter in the English language. One hundred sixty-seven thousand (167,000) illiterates went to France. They fought bravely by the side of their literate comrades. Many as the War Department records show, were killed or wounded because they understood little or no English.

During the six months preceding the armistice, illiterates were gradually segregated in development battalions. Schools in English were established, and when the war closed schools were in progress in all the large camps and good results were being obtained. It was found that in from three to six months, illiterates and non-English speaking could be trained into good soldiers by coupling with recruit instruction a thorough course in elementary English. When voluntary recruiting was resumed early in 1919, we soon found ourselves up against the old problem. "How to get the necessary number of recruits to fill the army." Profiting by our experience during the war the War Department decided to enlist illiterates and non-English speaking citizens and aliens who declare their intention to become citizens. The arguments for taking these steps were briefly these. The draft showed about 25% illiterate or almost illiterate in the English language. By permitting men in this class to enlist the army would open a heretofore untouched recruiting field amounting to almost 25% of the grown-up population of the United States. By enlisting these men for three years the War Department could afford to combine a course in English with recruit instruction, covering four or even six months, for at the end of this period these men would serve $2\frac{1}{2}$ to $2\frac{3}{4}$ years in their permanent organizations, and would, economically speaking, be at least twice as valuable as men enlisting for one year. The Army had special inducements to offer these men. They were assured a thorough

course in English as soon as enlisted. There was an additional advantage for non-citizens, namely, full citizenship at the end of a three-year enlistment.

By solving the problem of illiterates in the army in time of peace the War Department felt that it would further real preparedness, for in the event of another great war we shall no doubt again use illiterates and non-English speaking. This is going on the principle that problems that come up in time of war should be solved in time of peace. Again, if the illiterates and non-English speaking were good enough to fight for the country, in all justice, they are entitled to the peace time educational advantages that the army may offer. Last, and most significant no doubt was the argument that this educational and Americanization work would help to convince the people that the army in addition to being an insurance against war is also a real peace time asset.

Profiting by the experience gained during the war and preceding the war insofar as our near illiterates were concerned, it was decided to segregate these men as soon as enlisted, in order that an intensive course in English would be carried on hand in hand with the recruit instruction. For this purpose there was organized the recruit educational center. The first one was established at Camp Upton, N. Y., and under the emergency act which is still in force, Recruiting Officers in the Eastern part of the United States were instructed to accept illiterate and non-English speaking recruits to be sent to school at Camp Upton as soon as enlisted. At the present time there are gathered at this school at Camp Upton, some 1,700 students representing some forty-five racial groups; almost one-half are American-born illiterates. These American-born illiterates hail from every state east of the Mississippi. Classes are graduated every two weeks and when upon graduation these men join their permanent organizations they do so as self-respecting, English speaking American soldiers.

It is the intention of the War Department to extend this work to include the whole United States as soon as Congress revokes the old law that prohibits in time of peace, the enlistment of men who cannot speak, read and write English.

Perhaps a short description of how the work is carried on in this school will be of interest. When the men arrive at the school they are sent to a classification barracks for ten days. Here the men are issued their uniforms and equipment, they are examined by the Medical Officer and the Dental Surgeon. The Surgeon gives instruction in physical hygiene and the Dental Surgeon arranges for dental treatment whenever necessary. The men are given an intelligence test and on the basis of this test they are assigned to a place in the class. The men are also assigned to companies during this ten-day period. On the eleventh day the men join their companies fully equipped and ready to go to work. On the morning of the twelfth day the men start to school. The day is divided equally between military instruction and class-room work; three hours being devoted to each. The work is further divided into one and one-half hour periods, so that the soldier gets a period of class-room work and one of drill in the forenoon and like periods of instruction in the afternoon. In this way the military training cadre and the teachers do double shifts, half the men being engaged in class-room work, while the other half is on the drill field. The normal course in English is four months. Bright men finish the course in less time, and some of the dull ones may take as long as six months. The basis of the course is performance, and not any particular period of time, so that the designation "normal course" simply means that the average man completes the course in four months. The men's interest becomes aroused on the first day when they are told, (in many cases this is done through interpreters) that their first task will be to learn to write a letter in the English language. This task is completed in the second grade where

the last lesson requires the student to write a simple letter unassisted. Invariably these men are very proud of this first letter. It is their first real educational accomplishment. Each lesson in reading or writing is also a lesson in civics, American history, numbers, current events, or in some subject that concerns the duties of a soldier. The learning of English does not cease when the soldier leaves the class-room. In the squad room, at mess and in the drill squad the men are assigned regardless of nationality so that when a Greek finds on his right an Italian and on his left a Jugo-Slav, he will naturally do his best to acquire sufficient English to talk with his bunkies. This is simply taking advantage of the psychological fact that all human beings are more or less talkative and are instinctively inclined towards sociability. Much English is also acquired on the drill ground. In close order drill and physical exercises the men are taught to give the commands which they are to execute, and in that way there is brought into play not only the voice but also the sense of hearing, both of which are of first importance in the learning of the language. Twice a week the men go to singing school and each patriotic or popular song sung by the men becomes also a lesson in English. In the evenings teachers are always at hand in the library to assist the men in writing letters or in reading story books or current periodicals. From reveille until taps the men live in an American atmosphere. They soon forget all racial feelings and acquire the American viewpoint. I need hardly touch on the matter of what the people think of this Americanization scheme, for some of you gentlemen no doubt saw or heard of the "Americans All" detachment which I had the pleasure of showing in fifteen large cities in the country. This detachment, as some of you will remember, gave an exhibition drill in front of the Capitol.

I spent a couple of days recently at the Camp Upton school and some of the things I saw and heard were most astonish-

ing. I visited the reading room at night. In spite of a very strenuous day in school and on the drill field, I found many men hard at work acquiring English. One of the teachers had a group of about fifteen, they were reading stories and discussing topics of the day. In one corner two men were seated at a table. I talked with them and found that one of the men who had been at the school about three months was assisting the other man, recently arrived, in writing a letter home. A few days before my visit to Camp Upton a lawyer from a small Southern city came to Camp Upton for the purpose of effecting the discharge of a young illiterate boy on the ground that he was under age. The Commander of the Center took the visitor through the school and when the inspection was completed the lawyer said, "Well, I have changed my mind, I have talked to this boy, he not only wants to stay here but he belongs here. I am going back home to tell his mother that he is in good hands and that he is getting an education and a training such as he could not get anywhere else, and what is more I am going to send you a lot more illiterate boys from my section of the country."

A novel means of bringing the army and its ideas of education into touch with the people of the country has been arranged by the War Department through the medium of the Chatauqua plan. Five "Americans All" detachments are going on tours with a Chatauqua Company from June 1st to October 1st. Each detachment will consist of eight men representing from five to eight different nationalities. These detachments are now being organized at Camp Upton. I visited a class in public speaking which is organized especially to train men for the Chatauqua platform. The sincerity and feeling that these men put into their talks can not be adequately described. One must hear these talks to fully appreciate them. One fine big boy from Charleston, South Carolina, (his name is Greely, a good American name) told how

he worked as a fireman on the Seaboard Air Line. He was a good fireman, he admitted, and he could also run a locomotive. Several times he had an opportunity to become an engineer but he could not read and write, which kept him from promotion. He decided to enlist to get an education. He now reads and writes very well. He is ambitious. He is trying hard to make a place on the Chatauqua and when his enlistment is over he is confident that he will soon be master of a big Seaboard Air Line locomotive, which was and still is the height of his ambition. He fully appreciates that the army is making it possible for him to realize his ambition. Another Southern boy came up and said, I always knew that February 22 was a holiday, but I did not know why. I had never heard of George Washington. I heard men who were born in foreign lands make speeches on America and what America stands for. These men make the finest kind of soldiers because they are all anxious to learn. One company commander informed me that of his non-commissioned officers six sergeants and two corporals are graduates of this school. They were illiterate in the English language when they enlisted and now they occupy positions of responsibility in the army.

In summing up the work of the Recruit Educational Center I could not do better than quote the words of the Independent Magazine which said in a recent number: "The enlistment and education of illiterate and non-English speaking men which the army is doing at the present time is good business for the army, for it furnishes more and better soldiers." It is good business for the recruit for it increases his education and his earning capacity and it is good business for the nation, for it makes intelligent, patriotic, and disciplined citizens.

Speaking for the War Department, I urge you gentlemen to lend your assistance in getting House Bill No. 3707 which has been on the Calendar since October 27, 1919, through the House this session in order that this significant educational

and Americanization work may continue after peace is officially declared, for if education in the Army is to be carried on in the biggest and broadest way it must begin at the bottom; we must educate and Americanize the illiterates and non-English speaking.

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